

Home

Events

Wednesday, 22 October 2008 21:58

administrator



Resources

Music from the

Archives

Ghana Popular

Music 1931-1957

Nigeria Popular

Music 1954-1957

Collection

of shellac

records

Course at

the Centre for

African

Studies

Artists

CDs and DVDs

Alex van Heerden

Carlo Mombelli

Fezile 'Feya' Faku

Hilton Schilder

Lulama 'Lulu'

Gontsana

Mac McKenzie

Makaya Ntshoko

Marcus Wyatt

Paul Hanmer

Rockart

Siyavuya 'Siya'

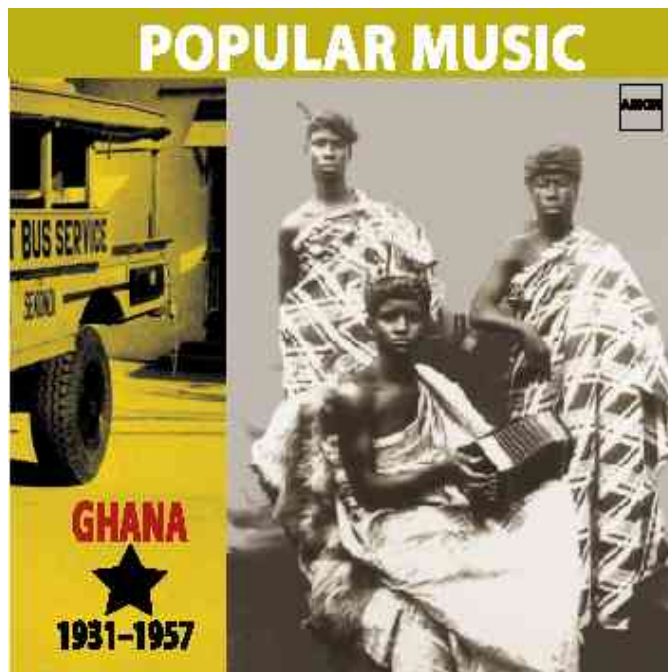
Makuzeni

The Swiss South

African Jazz Quintet

Tutu Puoane

Ghana Popular Music 1931-1957



Ghana Popular Music 1931-1957. From Palm Wine Music to Dance Band Highlife

CD, DISQUES ARION, ARN 64564, www.arion-music.com

List of titles:

1. [E.K. Anang's Band - Onua doO.B.'s Band - Wofa Woho](#)
2. Mexico Rhythm Band - Nana Kwesi wade Kwahu
3. [Kwadwo Seidu's Band - Otan nni aduro](#)
4. [H.K. Williams - Mene wobeko Tamale](#)
5. [Gyak's Guitar Band - Kumasi E.D.](#)
6. Yaw Ofori Singing Band - Bopra-pa
7. Osu Selected Union - Homowo Ese
8. [Kpagon Band - Ba wo ni aya ye](#)
9. Black Beats Band - Menenam
10. The Star Rockets Band - He dzo le ye hawo
11. [Presbyterian Church Singing Band - Psalm](#)

115 & 118

12. "See There"
Singing Band -
Anoma oreko
13. Akropong
Singing Band -
Monyi moho adi
14. Gyak's Guitar
Band - Pepeepe
15. E.K. Anang's
Band - Fa me
'Back Pay' ma
me
16. Appiah
Adjekum's Band
- Owu atwere
17. Kwadwo Seidu's
Band - Sika
adankum
18. B.E. Sackey
Band - Nkyrinna
19. The Radio Band
- Wonkyie ndi
20. Red Spots Band
- Essie Attah

This disc can be ordered directly from the producers whereby the benefit goes directly into the funding of the digitisation of all UTC-recordings at mission21.

"Ghana Popular Music 1931-1957" features a cross-section through the popular music of southern Ghana of the late colonial period as it was then recorded and distributed on 78rpm Shellac records by the Union Trading Company (UTC) of Basel, Switzerland. A compilation of 21 songs will take you on a fascinating journey of discovery through a rich and complex metissage of influences, rhythms, instruments and stiles, ranging from the rurally oriented palm wine music to the urban swinging dance bands of the 50s. The 20 page booklet contains an introduction to the popular music of Ghana written by Highlife specialist Prof. John Collins of the University of Ghana and the Bokoar African Popular Music Archives Foundation. The songs or the titles are translated and commented upon. The compact disc resulted from a pilot project which aimed at preserving and digitising an important collection of music from Ghana and Nigeria held at Basel, Switzerland. This is to make this music accessible again both to people in its countries of origin and to the interested public in general.

The origins of Highlife

Featuring different forms of popular music such as palm wine music, church choirs, singing bands, swinging dance bands and also art music, "Ghana Popular Music 1931-1957" documents the roots of the modern dance music of Ghana, which came to

world wide fame under the name of Highlife.

The West African coast has for centuries been a melting pot, where music styles and practices from various origins met. For example the Kru sailors of Liberia used to travel the whole of the West African coast right down to the Congo both in their own canoes and as hired crew on European and American trading vessels. They transported instruments and styles, such as the guitar and the concertina, the shanty tradition and guitar riffs, which met with the local rhythms and styles. Both guitar and concertina spread into the rural areas in the form of the so called palm wine music. Often it was a trio consisting of guitar, percussion (box drum and clips) and vocals that performed at venues where palm wine or its distilled form the cheap Akpeteshi were sold and also offered for the musician's motivation.

A rapidly growing migrating labour force shaped and transported also new forms of popular dances like the Ashiko or Osibisaba. These spread like wildfire across southern Ghana at the end of the 19th century and much to the dislike of missionaries and churches attracted huge crowds. But mission churches themselves with their chorals and teachings had a huge influence on the shaping of Highlife.

Church choirs with their slow dragging hymns and the more popular church singing bands were very mobile within the network of churches. Singing bands increasingly developed a life of their own, independent of the churches but rather tied to a specific town or conductor. The songs as well were no more exclusively religious in content.

A further influence were the regimental brass bands of the colonial military forces which became a major attraction. And with time at many places rich and influential Africans would set up a band of their own, through it displaying their wealth and influence. Churches as well could have a brass band of their own.

Palm wine trios often developed into larger guitar bands and even performed popular theatre. In the so called concert parties the musicians performed also as actors, the show and concert lasting the whole of the night.

Finally there were the dance orchestras which played for an upper class audience in the ball rooms of the southern Gold Coast. More and more they fused the western styles like Cha Cha Cha, Foxtrott, Waltz, Calypso and Rumba with the local rhythmic patterns. Had it first been a music for the elites only (thus the name High-life), dance band Highlife developed into a national music in the years of the independence when E.T. Mensah and his bands performed at the party rallies of Kwame Nkrumah. Their international tours brought Highlife to international fame and the recording industry helped in spreading it further.



UTC Junction, Accra, © mission21

The Union Trading Company of Basel

Soon after the introduction of the gramophone the music industry spread around the world - also to Africa ([click here to learn more about this boom industry](#)). In Ghana for example all the major trading companies sold records and gramophones. At first only recordings of European and American music were available. But this foreign music was already met with a lot of interest by the local market. When in the late 20's the label Zonophone did the first recordings of Ghanaian popular music in London the West African market developed into an Eldorado.

The Union Trading Company (UTC) of Basel, which had developed out of the economic activities of the evangelical Basel Mission Society and which was one of the big trading firms on the coast, was fast to hop on the running train. Between 1931 and 1957 the company recorded some 728 titles expanding its activities to Nigeria in the 50's. This booming business was only interrupted by the world economic crisis and WWII when the use of the raw materials was restricted and the transport routes were interrupted.

The UTC approach was quite simple. In the 30's it relied on the technicians of Zonophone/Regal for the recording. The records were produced in England under the Parlophone label for the exclusive distribution by the Union Trading Company. When UTC re-entered the African market after the second world war, it decided to employ one of their own staff to do the recording. He received a basic training by EMI and a mobile recording unit. Instead of doing extensive market research, UTC relied mainly on its African staff to point out interesting musicians and bands. This is one of the reasons why the UTC recordings cover the full range of Ghanaian popular music.

Digitising the UTC-records

All these different music styles are contained in a collection of more than 900 shellac records (78rpm), which was transferred to the archives of Mission21 when UTC stopped its activities roughly a year ago. It features 619 titles recorded in Ghana during

the 30's and 50's and 108 titles recorded in Nigeria during the 50's. Thus the collection is part of the Ghanaian and Nigerian cultural heritage and it is desired to make it accessible to people in these countries and the interested public in general. In West Africa the access to old time music is limited and even the Ghana Broadcasting Company suffers from a serious lack of music from those days. It is planned to digitise the whole of the collection, assuring its preservation and rendering the music accessible. The compact disc "Ghana Popular Music, 1931-1957" was produced as a pilot project for this digitisation. In the process an inventory of the collection was made and more than 100 shellac records were digitised. On the 4th of January 2002 the disc "Ghana Popular Music, 1931-1957" was launched with an outdoor ceremony at the W.E.B. DuBois Centre at Accra and copies of the digitised material were handed over to specific archives and public institutions in Ghana. This project received support from the following institutions and companies: WELINVEST, AFRICA IN BASEL - BASEL IN AFRICA, NESTLÉ GHANA LTD., FONOTECASVIZZERA, MEMORIAV, MISSION21.

As at now the project team is setting up a comprehensive digitisation project based on the experience gained in the pilot project. For this undertaking it is again looking for funding and is glad about every hint to a funding body. To learn more about the proposed procedure please download our project description and proposal as pdf-document and for further information contact Veit Arlt or Serena Dankwa.

See also:

German articles by Veit Arlt in Basler Magazin and Afrika Bulletin or by Marc Krebs in BaZ Online 28.12.2001.

A Celebration of Highlife Launching ceremony at the W.E.B. DuBois Centre for Pan-African Studies at Accra on the 4th of January 2002

Workshop on Highlife and Palm Wine Music in Witten (18.-23.11.2002) and Basel (02.-07.12.2002)

Historische Klänge aus Ghana (mp3 file, 5:31, 2.6 MB) - DRS2, 29.08.2002, 19:45-20:00

African Night: a replica of a Ghanaian Club of the early independence years was an attraction of the Basel Museumsnacht of January 17th 2003. On display were a number of life-size photographic reproductions depicting Ghanaian and Nigerian Highlife Stars of the 50s to 70s. These are on sale at a moderate price.



Yaw Ofori Singing Band, © Mission21

© 2003 Scientific African / Veit Arlt

Last Updated (Sunday, 02 November 2008 19:13)